

# 1991

**A** MERICANS are so emotionally fragile that soon we will have to be carried around in plastic bubbles and fed with an eye-dropper.

Entertainment's time-honored rule, "Always leave 'em laughing," has given way to "Always leave 'em secure." The last segment on news shows now features individuals who do strange things for muzzy reasons.

A man stands on a corner during rush hours to wave at passing motorists. A woman in a state that renews drivers' licenses on the driver's date of birth stands outside the motor-vehicles office singing "Happy Birthday" to everyone who goes in. A man cuts trees on a mountain slope into the shape of a heart visible for miles so that weary travelers can "take heart": Christ of the Andes meets Burma-Shave.

Asked why he does what he does, the subject shrugs, smiles indulgently at the self-evident question and replies, "I love people."

The jumpy, black-and-white commercial featuring a tormented soul wringing his hands because his long-distance phone system has ruined his life is usually a prelude to the "Family Of . . ." solution. Americans work for a Family Of, are insured by a Family Of, get their mufflers and brake jobs from a Family Of, buy and sell homes through a Family Of, get moved cross-country by a Family Of. Buy something from a mail-order house and you will become a member of the Damark Family; return it and you will become a member of the UPS Family. What all these firms really are selling is the perfect security of High Middle Ages feudalism, with the CEO as lord of the manor.

Like medievalists keeping a track of good and evil spirits, we divide people into "threatening" and "non-threatening." The latter, incredibly, is the person who falls upon a total stranger with a bear hug.

We constantly flash hideous smiles involving both rows of teeth. It isn't a smile, it's a rictus; the mouth simply drops open like a crocodile's. The banks of the Wabash have turned into the banks of the Nile.

We meet hostility with salvos of bigger and better niceness and warnings of "There's more niceness where that came from." This is not a virtue. Sunny congeniality and people who can't function without it cause more strain than a fistfight. Moreover, it's completely insincere: these smiling Jacks are simply trying not to get sued by someone even more insecure than they are.

How did we get this way? It began when the first settlers wondered, "Are the natives friendly?" and then found themselves looking at stoic Indians. Unsmiling faces have struck terror in the American heart ever since.

Next we acquired the melting pot. There are so many different kinds of people in America, with so many different boiling points, that we don't know how to fight with each other. The set piece that shapes and contains quarrels in homogeneous countries does not exist here.

The Frenchman is an expert on the precise gradations of *espèce de* and the Italian knows exactly when to introduce the subject of his mother's grave, but no American can be sure how or when another American will react, so we zap each other with friendliness to neutralize potentially dangerous situations.

The heritage of aloof warmth that prevails in countries old enough to have had a hierarchical past is not available to us, so we are forced to leap feet-first into cloying intimacy. The tender formality of "*gnädige Frau*" makes old ladies easy to respect, and stiff Englishmen long ago learned to express intrasex affection with "my dear Smith," but Americans have nothing to call each other except first names.

Insecurity produces a strange form of treason in the American heart. In our desperation to believe we are not hated personally, we relax and bask in relief when terrorists say, "It's the American government we hate, not the American people."

Our insecurity keeps us from solving our most pressing problem: crime. The few unequivocal souls who are willing to unleash the necessary curative measures shun politics because they know they would never even get nominated, much less elected. Captive of maudlin priorities, America instinctively shrinks from the only kind of personality capable of solving the problems we constantly deplore. Instead we vote for candidates with whom we "identify," i.e., those whose eyes plead, "Like me."



Trying to please others emotionally instead of ethically is the basis of insecurity. Buttering people up carries an ever-present threat of sliding on grease, so insecure people tend to be dangerous. The millions who are currently fiddling with self-esteem while America burns would do well to examine an entry in the journals of James Gould Cozzens:

The seamy side of human nature. You must be careful how you treat people as your equals. The average person has much more respect for you if, even though he resents it, you make it plain to him that you consider him of no great importance. The line may be a thin one, but if you're nice to him beyond what he, perhaps subconsciously, feels are his deserts he will much more often than not despise you for it.

By contrast, the aloof are sturdy oaks with a host of admirable if paradoxical virtues. Good manners build high walls, so those averse to intimacy make exceedingly pleasant "ships that pass in the night." As long as you remain a stranger they will be your friend forever.

They are punctiliously law-abiding, not because they are good people, but because good people are much more likely to be let alone. The aloof don't commit crimes because they know that prison life is communal. Moreover, long before he arrives at the ultimate communality of prison, the criminal must live a gregarious life. Most crimes require a gift of gab and an ability to inspire trust in the victim. Aloof people never become con artists or fences; as for child molestation, in order to molest a child you must first be in the same room with a child, and I don't know how perverts stand it.

The freemasonry of the insecure that surrounds illness in America explains why we are a nation of hypochondriacs. My worst nightmare is being a patient in a hospital and coming to the attention of volunteer strokers who serenade me with "You'll Never Walk Alone." I am sick—of compulsory gregariousness, fevered friendliness, we-never-close compassion, goo-goo humanitarianism, sensitivity that never sleeps, and politicians paralyzed by a hunger to be loved. Therefore this column will be devoted to winning one for the sonofabitch.

*August 12, 1991*